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Keep an Eye out for Eye Injuries

Close your eyes. Now imagine that you can never open them again.

What would you miss seeing most? A vivid sunset? A good movie? The smiling faces of the people you love?

Blindness or other vision loss is something none of us likes to contemplate. In fact, Americans have consistently identified fear of vision loss as second only to fear of cancer in opinion polls over the past several decades. A worldwide study released in 2008 found that twice as many people were afraid of going blind as were afraid of premature death.

From a public health perspective, blindness and vision loss put serious social and economic burdens on both individuals and society. They cause suffering, disability, and loss of productivity, and they diminish quality of life. According to the National Eye Institute, eye disease and vision loss cost the United States about \$68 billion a year. No one can put a pricetag on the joy of gazing into your loved ones' eyes.

While eye diseases caused by aging are a growing public health concern in this country, so too are eye injuries. They represent a primary cause of vision loss among all age groups – the leading cause among people under the age of 25.

Focusing on the Dangers

Not surprisingly perhaps, sports and recreation account for more than 40 percent of eye injuries, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO). Fishing is one of the biggest culprits (not that the fish are out to get us; it's those errant hooks and rod tips we have to watch out for). Boxing, baseball, basketball, and racquet sports also put participants at high risk of eye injury.

What may be more surprising is that almost half of eye injuries occur in the home. Forty percent are a result of such seemingly harmless activities as home repairs, yard work, cleaning, and cooking. The AAO has reported that accidents involving common household products like bleach, cleaning solvents, paints, and pesticides cause 125,000 eye injuries a year.

Among young children, the most common causes of eye injuries are falls, auto accidents, contact with harmful household products, misuse of toys, and misuse of everyday tools and objects (think running with scissors).

Seeing the Way to Safety

Yet there are simple precautions we can all take to protect our eyes and keep our vision healthy. First and foremost: Wear protective eyewear when engaging in sports or other risky activities. (Don't count on regular eyeglasses to provide enough protection.)

The AAO contends that 90 percent of all eye injuries could be prevented simply by making this one lifestyle change. Yet the organization has found that 78 percent of eye injury victims were not wearing protective eyewear when their injury occurred. It's clear to see that there's a lot of room for improvement here.

Eye safety experts recommend buying at least one pair of approved protective eyewear for your household. Then keep them on hand for those sometimes unexpected chores that could put you at risk. And don't forget that bystanders may be at risk, too, so additional pairs may be a good investment.

Here are a number of other steps we can take to protect our eyes and our sight:

- Read the labels of chemicals and cleaners, follow directions, and don't mix products;
- Make sure spray nozzles are pointed away from you before using;
- Use a grease shield when cooking with hot oil or grease;
- Secure rugs and railings and provide lights and handrails on stairs to help prevent falls;
- Cushion sharp corners;
- Remove debris from your lawn before mowing;
- Keep all tools in good condition to prevent parts flying loose;
- Keep paints, pesticides, and fertilizers stored in a secure area; and
- Wear lenses that block all ultraviolet light when you're outside in the sun.

If you have children in your home, take these extra precautions:

- Teach kids safe use of household items that could cause eye injury, like pencils, scissors, rubber bands, and paper clips;
- Buy age-appropriate toys and avoid projectile toys;
- Don't allow kids to play with BB or pellet guns;
- Use safety gates at the top and bottom of stairs to prevent falls;
- Use cabinet and drawer locks in kitchens and bathrooms;
- Don't allow kids near fireworks (almost 30 percent of all injuries from fireworks result in eye problems that can lead to blindness);
- Teach children how to behave in the presence of dogs (about 15 percent of dog bites involve eye injuries); and
- Make sure kids are properly restrained in vehicles, and secure loose items that could become projectiles in a quick stop or crash.

For more information about eye injuries and their prevention:

- American Academy of Ophthalmology: www.geteyesmart.org/eyesmart/living/
- Prevent Blindness America: www.preventblindness.org
- National Library of Medicine: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/eyeinjuries.html

*The mission of the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department
is to improve and protect the health of all county residents.*